



Penwheels Newsletter

Winter Issue 2020

For Escapees Writers, Published or Not

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Penwheels is a private group of Escapees members who enjoy writing and discussing the writing adventure.

The Penwheels Newsletter is digitally published quarterly.

[Archives Available](#)



Jaimie's Tips

I was shocked to read in Angela's *Writers Weekly* that you cannot leave a review on Amazon unless you have spent \$50 in the past 12 months!

So, even if friends are verified purchasers, they might not be able to post a review (unless they are Amazon Prime members). [You can read it here.](#)

Many RVers are experts in frugality! You may have an article waiting to happen. Read "[Three Paying Markets for 'Frugal' Writers](#)" – by Rachel Carrington in the 9/17/20 issue of *Writer's Weekly*.

If you have any sort of physical disability or limitation, this compilation of tools in the 10/14/20 issue of *Writers Weekly*, "[Don't Let a Disability Stop You From Writing!!](#)" – by Jade Williams, may help you continue to write.

If you have self-published with a company like Xlibris and you no longer want to have them sell your titles, it can be tricky. [Here's Angela's advice](#) .



Braggin' Rights

Joanne Alexakis

In the *Escapees* **Sept/Oct 2020** magazine, we have a thoughtful reminiscence: Lew Leistikow SKP#6177 contributes *Longing for Days Gone By*, a heartwarming piece recalling Lew's RVing travel adventures, on page 25.

New Pewheeler, Gerri Almand SKP#159441, markets her book, *The Reluctant RV Wife*, on page 86. (More from Gerri later.)

In the **Nov/Dec 2020 issue** of our *Escapees* magazine (SKP Stops - page 18), Betty Prange SKP#22195 took us on a tour of Forestiere Underground Gardens by Fresno, California. Betty, thanks for being our docent on this informative and interesting short visit!

Looking for a job? Gaylord Coston SKP#106778 was working on the *Escapees SmartWeigh* program when he contributed this notification to the magazine - page 11. It's a job opportunity and a good safety tip at the same time.



Epic Failures

Ellen Behrens

I just finished reading a novel by a writer who's since added at least a half-dozen more titles to this particular series. I won't be reading another. I gave a lot of thought to what went wrong—and hopefully we'll all have learned something from this—and other—epic fails.

Very early on I discovered the book had a clear political stance. As a treatise on how George Orwell's *1984* was coming to fruition, the book suffered from a fundamental error: the author had written the book to make a point.

In my review, I wrote: "Generally, if you want to read a political treatise disguised as a novel, have at this book. If you'd rather read something that has believable characters, natural-sounding dialogue, and an interesting plot—find another book." Which leads us to Lesson One:

If you want to make a point, write an essay, not a novel.

Another book I started (but couldn't finish) opens with a long notebook entry. Then its first chapter is labeled as if it's going to take place in 1928 but begins instead with a grandfather telling a very precocious six year-old a story, which turns out to be a story being written by Emily, who's writing about the six year-old and his grandfather telling him a story. That's followed by a bunch of exhaustive descriptions about "Emily" and her stereotypic, disapproving mother talking about trashy novels, what to eat, what's not in the cupboards, after which even more characters are introduced....

Whose story was this, anyway? And when was it occurring? The story's details seemed more recent than 1928. A lot of writing had gone into these first sections, but none of it revealed anything important. At least I don't think so. I felt adrift in the ocean of the story and had to abandon ship.

So, Lesson Two:

Make the setting and main characters clear in the first page or so.

I was reminded of how important endings are when I read a mystery novella with a fairly predictable plot (and culprit). The mystery was solved about two-thirds the way through, but perhaps worried readers would feel they'd paid too much for a short story, the author added another seven

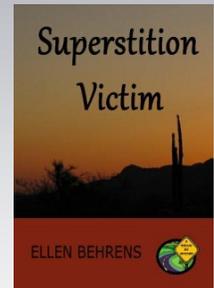
chapters with a subplot that hadn't even been hinted at earlier. That was followed by three more chapters to close a very minor subplot. No twists, no turns. Just on and on. I couldn't help wondering what the point was, unless it was Lesson Three:

Don't write past the story's ending.

Good idea—I'll end here!

Ellen Behrens' short stories have been widely published. Her third Rollin RV Mystery, *Superstition Victim*, is now available, and she's completing a guide on reading to improve your writing.

If you'd like a free e-book for of either one for review purposes, please e-mail ellen-behr@aol.com with your request; please note your Penwheels membership and the format needed.



Easy Peasy Penwheels

Writers' Challenge

from Joanne

Something new. A little different. We are throwing out a couple questions for your email reply. We hope these EASY PEASY questions will inspire comments from all of you. Respond to either or both questions. Have fun with this!

#1 What if it is time to 'Hang Up the Keys? How are you going to handle it? Are you going to stay in your RV, but in a stationary site? Go bricks & sticks? Where? In the hot south or the cooler northern USA? Will friends, family or a job influence your choice?

#2 How did you get your nickname?

PWers, your writers' challenge is to address these questions. A maximum of 100 words please. Send your contributions to me: joalexakis@earthlink.net

We will print them in an upcoming issue.





RVing, Writing, & Orchids

Gerri Almand

"I wrote that book, you know," my charming husband said, looking me straight in the eye.

"What are you talking about?"

"You had absolutely nothing to say until we started RVing." He grinned. "That's why I should get all the credit for *The Reluctant RV Wife*."

"Idiot," I muttered under my breath.

Yet, maybe he had a point. I'd wanted to be a writer all my life. Instead, I became a social worker and spent forty years working with children and families. While I wrote a lot of reports, it was not the kind of writing I wanted to do.

Retirement in 2010 enabled me to pursue my writing dreams. After becoming a Master Gardener, I started climbing the steep, slippery ladder of learning how to write. I joined writers' groups, took classes, and attended conferences and workshops.

With two hundred orchids thriving on my lanai, a manicured yard outside my window, and a few short publications under my belt, I celebrated my new freedom from alarm clocks and business casual attire.

My previously well-behaved, rational hubby retired five years later and triggered an unexpected, four-year collision of wills.

He proposed we buy an RV and spend at least six months each year on the road.

"You've lost your mind," I said. My blood boiled. "One does not go off in an RV and leave two hundred orchids behind."

A five-month RV trip to Alaska in 2017 proved a turning point. I started writing down my angst, trying to reconcile the chasm between what my husband wanted and what I thought I wanted. I came to realize my roots, both the literal and the figurative ones, had stymied my personal development.

I dug deep to find my ultimate truth. In the process, I found a new writing voice. By the time we returned home to Tampa, Florida, I'd drafted a 90,000-word manuscript about our RV conflict, which I dubbed 'The Reluctant RV Wife.'

Looking back, I never dreamed an RV would create such profound changes in my life. Throw in a pandemic, our RV now serves as a safe cocoon from the coronavirus curse. With marital harmony restored, I am again the sparkle in my hubby's eye. Why? I've abandoned gardening and embraced a nomadic lifestyle, one with writing at its core.

The open road gives me things to say, or it at least provides more material for my husband to claim. Plus, there's always room on the dashboard for an orchid, if my need becomes urgent.

Gerri Almand is the author of *The Reluctant RV Wife* (Aug. 2019) and *Home Is Where the RV Is* (Sept. 2020). Learn more at <https://gerrialmand.com>.

Join the Discussion

Hey everyone! Let's use our space on **RVillage.com** to get a discussion group active. Once you sign in (free to join), click **Groups** in the toolbar. Move down the page to **Search**. Enter **Penwheels**. On our homepage, click **Group Forum** at the top of the page. Click on **Q&A**.

New discussion just added on Book Marketing, join us.

Feel free to add a new question or opinion by selecting **New Discussion**.



From the Editor

What is the Truth?

Characters reflect real people in a purified or idealized state. And so, we can see in them qualities and traits that are hard to see within ourselves. One of the most difficult challenges we face every day are exemplified by characters in virtually every story – the inability to confidently understand “what is truth?”

We cannot move to resolve a problem until we recognize the problem. Even if we feel the inequity, until we can pinpoint it or understand what creates it, we can neither arrive at an appropriate response or act to nip it at its source.

If we had to evaluate each inequity that we encounter with an absolutely open mind, we could not learn from experience. Even if we had seen the same thing one hundred times before, we would not look to our memories to see what had turned out to be the source or what appropriate measures had been employed.

We would be forced to consider every little friction that rubbed us the wrong way as if we have never encountered it. Certainly, this is another form of inefficiency, as “those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

In such a scenario, we would not learn from our mistakes, much less our successes. But is that inefficiency? What if we encounter an exception to the rules we have come to live by? If we rely completely on our life experience, when we encounter a new context in life, our whole paradigm may be inappropriate.

Why doesn't a character (or person) simply give up the old view for the new? There are two reasons why one will hold on to an outmoded, inappropriate understanding of the relationships between things. We'll outline them one at a time.

[Read on ...](#)

The Hero Breaks Down

Groucho Marx once said, “You're headed for a nervous breakdown. Why don't you pull yourself to pieces?” That, in fact, is what we're going to do to our hero.

Now many writers focus on a Hero and a Villain as the primary characters in any story. And there's nothing wrong with that. But as we are about to discover, there are so many other options for creative character construction.

Take the average hero. What qualities might we expect to find in the guy or gal? For one thing, the traditional hero is always the Protagonist. By that we mean he or she is the Prime Mover in the effort to achieve the story goal. This doesn't presuppose the hero is a willing leader of that effort. For all we know he/she might accept that charge kicking and screaming. Nonetheless, once stuck in the situation, the hero drives the push to achieve the goal.

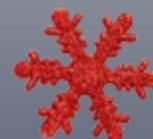
Another quality of a stereotypical hero is that he/she is also the Main Character. By this we mean that the hero is constructed so that the audience stands in his shoes. In other words, the audience identifies with the hero and sees the story as centering around him.

A third quality of the most usual hero configuration is being a “Good Guy.” Simply, he intends to do the right thing. Of course, he might be misguided or inept, but he wants to do good, and he does try.

And finally, let us note that heroes are usually the Central Character, meaning that he gets more “media real estate” (pages, screen time, lines of dialog) than any other character.

Listing these four qualities we get:

The rest of the story . . .



Characters: The Attributes of Age

Some writers tend to create characters that are more or less the same age as themselves. Other writers populate their stories with characters of all ages but have them all act as if they are the same age as the author. On the one hand, this follows the old adage that one should write about what one knows. But on the other hand, while such characters may function well enough, somehow they don't ring true.

In real life, we encounter people of all ages in most situations. And while every individual is unique, there are certain attributes common to broad age groups that need to be built into your characters if they are come across as real people.

In this writing tip we're going to uncover a variety of traits that bear on an accurate portrayal of age, and even offer the opportunity to explore seldom-depicted human issues associated with age, be it young or old.

[Continue . . .](#)

Why Characters Misunderstand Each Other

All of our understandings of each other are based on the narratives we create to get a grip on what someone's intent is, and what their future behavior is likely to be.

Basically, we want to know what they mean by what they say, and what they are likely to do.

But trying to grasp someone else's meaning is an interpretive art. And in addition, we all have our own blinders on – our own expectations based on a history of interactions, both with the specific individual with whom we are communicating and with other people, both similar and no so much, gathered over the course of our lives.

In the article that follows, I use the word "justification" to describe how those past experiences add up to expectations, pre-judgments and even blind spots that keep us from seeing what's really going on or even warp it to convince us things are quite different – even opposite – of what someone really intended or intended to do. [Read on . . .](#)

Where Do Characters Come From?

When we speak of characters from a structural standpoint, there are very specific guidelines that determine what is a character and what is not. But when we think of characters in every day life, they are simply anything that has a personality, from your Great Aunt Bertha (though some might argue the point) to the car that never starts when you're really late.

Looking back through time, it is easy to understand how early humans would assume that other humans like themselves would have similar feelings, thoughts, and drives. Even other species exhibit emotions and make decisions, as when one confronts a bear face to face and watches it decide whether to take you on or find easier pickings (a personal experience from my recent hike on the John Muir trail!)

[The rest of the story . . .](#)

Alert!

It is wise these days to be alert to a new flood of companies that seek out new authors and promise to promote you to success. Their contracts are binding, so doing your due diligence research BEFORE signing up can save you heartbreak and money. [Victoria Strauss of Writer Beware](#) should be on your bookmark list to reach out when you have a question.

Bad Contract Alert: EMP Entertainment and A&D Entertainment

"Lately I've been hearing from writers who've been solicited by one or another of two companies offering to distribute their books to Webnovel, a Wattpad-like platform based in Asia: *EMP Entertainment and A&D Entertainment*. (Note: there are a number of companies with similar names focused on concert invites, event scheduling, and DJ services.) that allow authors to continue to publish on other platforms (such as Wattpad, where both companies are actively approaching writers) if they choose.

World of Publishing

A Lulu of a Choice

Ellen Behrens

For years I've been a fan of Lulu for self-publishing. I've been using them since my first self-published book in 2009, a complicated paperback manual with embedded tables and other features. I loved how easy it was, that I could get paid with a paper check, and didn't have to file a personal information with them other than my name and address.

Those last issues are important for us on the road, right? Why have more private information floating around online than we need to have? Offering alternatives to providing my banking information, social security number, or other tax information has been something I've appreciated about Lulu.

This past summer they decided to upgrade their site. I lost access to my sales reports for weeks, some of the book information went haywire for awhile, and other problems plagued the site. Frustrating as it was, I bit my tongue, took deep breaths, and told myself—because I worked for a Web company for awhile and know how easily something that seems simple can get complicated—things would get better.

And they did.

Until last week. Periodically I check my books on Amazon to be sure everything is looking good, so—without logging on—I did a search with my name. Two books came up, both print versions being re-sold as new. All of my eBooks were gone.

Vanished. As if they never existed.

I've blogged about what I believe is happening at <https://ellenbooks.com>, and it's supposed to be rectified, but I'm losing a day of possible sales with every day the problem goes on.

The bottom line is that I'm re-evaluating my long-time association with Lulu. For those of you considering using Lulu, please weigh it as an option very, very carefully. As with all services it has its benefits. But when things have gone wrong for Lulu, it seems they've gone very, very wrong.

Marketing Overview for Self-publishers

Margo Armstrong

When I start self-publishing in 2012, it is pretty straight forward. My genre of non-fiction/how-to/self-help is still small. The options to self-publish are limited. Vanity press and publishing houses are the focus for writers. Self-publishing is not yet considered legit, so what if the self-published author made 20x the royalty publishing houses are paying.

It cost about \$10,000 to get started with a vanity press, more for promotion costs and tours. This price usually bought you 100-1000 hard copy books shabbily edited with a cover for tours and other promotions. The con was to encourage you to hire them for promotions. No guarantees of any kind (at least not enforceable). Once their job is done, you have a garage full of books and no plan from there.

Legit publishing houses that provided full services with no upfront charge and a possible advance on sales were accepting very few new books every year, so celebrity status was important to land one. The author made about 50 cents per book sold, less if an electronic version.

Writers desiring to see their work in print are a restless breed, and soon new companies or expansions of old ones began to offer self-publishing opportunities. If you accept this new concept, a no-up-front-cost program takes your content and turns it into an electronic book and a printed book at no charge to you.

These companies also offer sales organization to back it up. Among the first to charter these waters, Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and Apple. For their profit, these companies charged a percentage of the retail price for each book sold to an online customer. Printed books cost more but the shipping charges are added to the customer's bill.

What a concept. With good writing skills and subject matter, the odds were good that you create sales without spending a penny out of your own pocket.

It took a few years, but by 2017, self-publishing was all the rage. Now the games began. Barnes & Noble was on its way out of the business, Apple expanded its services to non-Apple customers, and several small budding self-publishing companies opened for the masses. These companies provided for an extra fee: editing, cover generators and marketing training.

The jockeying for book exposure created a whole industry of algorithm-induced systems to drive the authors crazy. Amazon tried to outdo all competitors with razzle dazzle but failed in the long run to supply a system that works smoothly. The Book Review star system brought out every con artist/media cheat weaned on YouTube videos throwing Amazon into a dark pit that they are still trying to claw themselves out of today.

Today, my suggestion is to keep it simple, limit your book sales expectations to your budget. I suggest one path to follow at the current time. Focus on Amazon. Join the Select program. Take advantage of the 5-day Free Book Giveaway each 90-day cycle to build your Review stars. Spend \$40-\$200 (genre-related) on a 1-day promotion during that time period (Freebooksy.com has yielded 1200-2500 giveaway stats for me and several star ratings up).

Amazon Ads used to produce some results, but this no longer works for most of us. Running promotions with agencies that do not produce results is common in the beginning. Each genre generates a different promotional path.

Don't try to be logical when deciphering this madness. Amazon looks at this giveaway period as a sales period (you get nothing but ratings). The more books out of the door, the more promotion they give your book. I'm sure Amazon has their behind-the-scenes reasons not related to the author or sales count for this action.

Please do not beat up on yourself about the sales numbers. Set your goal as self-satisfaction and expression rather than a dollar sign.

If book sales is the goal, prepare to build extensive SEO and social media skills. Plan to use these skills at least 40 hours a week. This is no part-time effort.

The other option is spending thousands of dollars once you find a third-party expert that excels to that level of providing sales that exceed the promotion costs (hopeful).

IMHO, if you want to produce high sales numbers spend high dollar amounts. Find a promotion company that works well in your genre, then spend, spend, spend.

On [RVillage.com](https://www.rvillage.com) we have a Penwheels forum that welcomes comments on this topic, the results to be shared with all in the Spring 2021 issue of Escapees BOF Penwheels Newsletter.

Input deadline Feb 15th, 2021. Please join us with your comments. Let's help others push through this maze to success.

